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ABSTRACT

This report describes an intervention to aid students in demonstrating their comprehension of reading material through an alternative instrument. The target population consisted of fifth grade students in a middle class community in central Illinois. Problems in comprehension were revealed through declining district test scores and teacher observations. Analysis of related data revealed that students arrive at school with varied experiential backgrounds, but are not given a variety of testing situations that would tap into these various experiences. This shows strongly in the area of reading. Traditional testing has only measured what a child can recall or recognize from the presented material. Teachers are concerned with this comprehension problem. A review of solutions strategies suggested in the research resulted in the selection of three major objectives of intervention. The interventions included the use of alternate teaching strategies, the use of student portfolios, and a change in assessment methods to be contrasted with traditional methods. In review of the post-intervention data it was found that a majority of students scored higher when tested authentically in contrast to the traditional testing methods. Class averages on unit tests were also higher on the authentic tests as opposed to the traditional tests. (Contains 2 tables of data, 3 figures, and 31 references; 12 pages of sample forms, including a teacher survey, various types of graphic organizer tests, and other tests, are appended.) (Author/CR)

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IIMPROVING STUDENT READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS THROUGH THE USE OF AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

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An Action Reasearch Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the

School of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching and Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This report describes an intervention to aid students in demonstrating their comprehension of reading material through an alternative instrument. The target population consisted of fifth grade students in a middle class community in central Illinois. The problems in comprehension were revealed through declining district test scores and teacher observations.

Analysis of related data revealed that students arrive at school with varied experiential backgrounds, but are not given a variety of testing situations that would tap into these various experiences. This shows strongly in the area of reading. Traditional testing has only measured what a child can recall or recognize from the presented material. Teachers are concerned with this comprehension problem.

A review of solutions strategies suggested in the research resulted in the selection of three major objectives of intervention. The interventions will include using alternate teaching strategies, the use of student portfolios, and a change in assessment methods to be contrasted with traditional methods.

In review of the post intervention data the researchers found that a majority of students scored higher when tested authentically in contrast to the traditional testing methods. Class averages on unit tests were also higher on the authentic tests as opposed to the traditional tests.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

Students of the targeted fifth grade language arts classes exhibit a lack of comprehension. This is evident when tested with traditional objective tests. These tests are intended to measure only what the student can recall or recognize from the information presented. The form in which a test question is asked, answered, or accepted by the teacher may not reveal the true picture of the student's knowledge. Evidence of the existence of the problem includes teachers' informal shared responses about student learning, daily scores, and unit scores. Student reflection of the story content in reading class has proven inaccurate or shallow in displaying understanding of the literal and implied meanings when a traditional assessment instrument has been used.

Immediate Problem Context

The targeted school is a part of an elementary district. The district includes four schools housing students in grades pre-kindergarten through fourth grade and one middle school housing students in fifth grade through eighth grade. There are 2,639 students enrolled in the district. The racial ethnic background of the total enrollment in the district includes 68.9% White, 13.2% African American, 15.6% Hispanic, 1.9% Asian Pacific Islander, and 0.4% Native American. The district includes 31.1% low income students. These students are from families receiving public aid, living in institutions for neglected or delinquent children, being supported in foster homes

with public funds, or being eligible to receive free or reduced price lunches. There are 4.9% of the students that are limited in their English proficiency and enrolled in the bilingual education department. The attendance rate for the district is 94.6%, with a district mobility rate of 29.2%. There are 3.5% of the students classified as chronic truants due to absences without valid cause. The operating expenditure per pupil in the 1994-1995 school year was $5,010. Total district expenses that year were $13,103,947.

The faculty and staff of the targeted school consist of 117 employees. There are 77 teachers, 5 classroom aides, 3 counselors, 3 administrators, 3 secretaries, 2 nurses, 14 kitchen workers, 7 custodians, and 4 additional aides for assistance in health, clerical, learning center, and in-school suspension duties. There is one head of the language arts department, four math facilitators, and four science facilitators. A two year program of staff development in math and science using hands-on materials is continuing. The faculty has an average teaching experience of 13 years. Teachers with bachelor degrees account for 64% of the faculty while 36% have master degrees. The ethnicity of the faculty is 90.3% White, 2.4% African American, 6% Hispanic, and 1.2% Asian Pacific Islander. The 83 teachers, administrators, and counselors include 26.5% male and 73.5% female.

The targeted school is in two buildings and shares a campus with one of the four elementary buildings of the district. The North building was constructed originally in the late fifties as an elementary building. This building is where 11 sections of fifth grade are housed along with two Chapter 1 classes, two of the six exploratory classes available to grades six through eight, six special education classes, one physical education gymnasium also used as a lunchroom, one music class, and one section of eighth grade English. All other classes are housed in the South building which was constructed in the mid sixties as a two story facility, with a basement level and a ground floor. It was originally a junior high school. This building has a Learning Center, nine sixth grade classrooms, nine seventh grade classrooms, nine eighth grade classrooms, with two

teams serving each grade level, four exploratory classrooms, a large band room, five classrooms serving a special services team, and six classrooms serving a special education team.

Within the school day several educational programs are made available to the fifth grade students. Advisor Advisee is a self-awareness, self-esteem program taught once a week by the classroom teacher. Drug Awareness Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) is a drug education program presented by the city police under the supervision of the teacher in the classroom. Another program is Junior Achievement offered by the local business community under the supervision of the classroom teacher. Good Diet is a nutrition program available from the County Extension Service with the classroom teacher supervising. Computer Education is presented to all fifth graders in a 12 week daily program. Language arts classes, spelling classes, and mathematics classes participate in intraschool and interschool competitions. Conflict Mediation is a social skills program provided to the students by the counseling staff. Other specialized classes are available for those students who meet the criteria.

After-school programs available to the fifth graders include tutoring and mini classes. Rock Island County Council on Addictions (RICCA) offers the tutoring with teachers and educational aides hired to assist. The mini classes are made available by Students Taking A Right Stand (STARS) and includes mini classes from art to chess to jewelry making. The STARS program was established through the school counseling department and includes many teachers sharing their hobbies and talents. Student Council is offered by the staff to train elected students in school service and government. Drama classes and chorus are offered by staff to encourage students in the performing arts. An intramural sports program is available to help support the physical side of education.

The Surrounding Community

The targeted school is located in a community of slightly over 20,000 residents and is part of a larger community of over 385,000 people. Of this total, the ethnicity divides as a population of 80% White, 10% African American, and 10% Hispanic. The percentages of school aged

children further breaks down to 68.9% White, 13.2% African American, 15.6% Hispanic, and 1.2% Asian Pacific Islander. The median income of this community is $24,746 with the majority of the households falling in the low to middle income range. Less than 3% of the population have incomes of $60,000 or more. The incomes by ethnic groups can be broken into two categories, one making less than $15,000 and one making $15,000-$50,000. Of the families whose income is less than $15,000 Whites make up 29.5%, African Americans make up 49.7%, and Hispanics make up 39.4% respectively. In the second category of $15,000-$50,000 Whites make up 51.7%, African Americans make up 43.7%, and Hispanics make up 49.4%.

The ethnic division of adults over 25, which is the average parenting age for school children, who have not completed high school is as follows: 24.5% White, 47.9% African American, and 50.9% Hispanic. These figures are in keeping with those reflected in the income table.

The community is primarily a manufacturing center. Of 15,325 jobs within the city, 11,100 are industrial in nature, 3,250 are business or service related, and 975 are government. Of those people employed, 75% work outside of this city with 13% being employed out-of-state. At least 80% of these working people live less than 25 minutes from their employment. Both the industrial nature of employment and the time away from the home have an impact on the ability of these workers to be involved with their children's school.

Since the targeted school's change from a junior high to a middle school, the school has tried to implement its program under the Illinois guidelines for middle schools. These guidelines call for an increase in the technology field, added programming such as exploratory programs, daily physical education, and a minimum square footage allowance per student. These and other problems have made the school unable to comply with the guidelines. For this reason and others prevalent in the elementary buildings of the town, a tax referendum was proposed to pay for needed improvements and repairs. Major renovations of the district school buildings have not occurred during the past three decades. Updates are needed in the areas of electrical, plumbing,

and heating. Seven classes are meeting in mobile classrooms. Libraries are approximately one fourth the size recommended by national middle school guidelines. Cafeterias in all schools double as physical education facilities. All schools have at least one room that is divided by temporary partitions to accommodate two or more programs at one time. None of the schools have sufficient electrical wiring to meet the demands of computer usage within the building. This request for more taxes has caused community dissension. The request was denied by the voters on April 1, but will continue to be promoted before each election that comes up until it is passed.

In response to low scores on the Illinois Goals Assessment Program (IGAP) reading test, the district contracted with Illinois State University to conduct a study of reading strategies used by teachers. The district reading study was conducted from February to April.

National Context of the Problem

The problem of accurately assessing what a student has learned has been a subject of discussion for some time. Many times student learning is assessed with validity, but not fairness, due to the method of learning. Usually, students are simply asked to select correct responses with little consideration of their reasoning. So, do schools stick with something that is valid, but unfair, or do they switch to something that is fair but has little validity? "All children are smart, and the job of teachers and parents is to help kids find the style of learning and testing that lets their unique natural intelligence shine through" (Kennedy, 1994, p. 222).

Traditional testing by definition includes teacher-made, textbook-created, and district-adopted standardized tests. Traditional testing has rarely tapped into the way a student thinks or retains information. However, it does provide a measure for a child whose strength lies in learning in a verbal or mathematical way. Rita Dunn stated, in Van Horn, 1996, that traditional testing ignores the many other learning styles or ways of processing knowledge. Robinson and Craver wrote that these tests were established to provide a way to compare students' scores for placement, to indicate strengths and weaknesses of the student, and to rank the performance of the teacher, school, and district (as cited in Bowers, 1989). For those reasons teachers have often

taught lessons directly related to the test. The administrators in many districts encourage this practice as the results reflect on them as well. The traditional test is easily scored and administered (Lam, 1995). The fact that these tests overlook any meaningful application of information is considered irrelevant. The emphasis of these tests seems to be more on an instrument whose scores can be compared globally rather than an assessment that shows transfer of learned information.

Several states have taken measures to try and address the problem of the weakness of traditional tests. As Massey points out, California has designed a writing section to their testing and will try a performance-based approach in the areas of science and history. Connecticut has performance tasks in the areas of science, foreign languages, and business education (as cited in Bowers, 1989). Vermont has legislation pending for funds to establish a portfolio assessment to go along with their regular standardized testing.

Many people feel to shift from standardized assessment to performance-based assessment would "sacrifice reliability for validity" (Bowers, 1989, p. 3). Furthermore, when applying any type of adapted scoring and interpretation there is the chance of encouraging low expectations for coddled students, and ultimately lessening their competitive edge when entering the workforce (Lam, 1995). The method of scoring does not lend itself to reliable results like the cost and time efficient traditional test. George Madaus, director of the Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational Policy, believes performance-based testing "is not efficient; it's expensive; it doesn't lend itself to mass testing with quick turnaround time--but it's the way to go" (as cited in Bowers, 1989, p. 3). What, then, is gained if we fail to assess all abilities and outcomes that are valued only because they are time-consuming, expensive, or labor-intensive?

Teachers have been told in recent years to try to teach to the different styles of learners. The current popular phrases of multiple intelligences and cooperative learning appear often when teachers attend workshops to learn new teaching methods. The assessment of these lessons, however, is often the same style as before, which is teacher-created, textbook publisher provided,

or district-adopted standardized tests. If what Armstrong said about teaching methods being faulty because they do not recognize that different children learn in different ways is true, then it follows that our testing methods are also faulty (as cited in Kennedy, 1994). New approaches to assessment should be explored to correct this faultiness.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

In order to document the extent of student lack of understanding on traditional objective tests an informal survey was conducted with the fifth grade language arts teachers at the targeted school (Appendix A). In addition, the most current standardized test scores in reading comprehension were gathered and analyzed. In reviewing the past classroom records kept by the teachers from previous years in the area of comprehension, the researchers found that students performed poorly with traditional objective assessment. This review included both daily and unit scores.

During the opening two institute days of the school year the informal survey was administered to the fourteen fifth grade language arts teachers. The results follow in table one.

Table 1

Summary of Teacher Survey of Perceived Student Comprehension

Question	Yes		No		Undecided	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Strong comprehension skills	4	29%	8	57%	2	14%
If no, could it be the test form	7	88%	0	0%	1	12%
More success if offered assessment choices	9	64%	1	7%	4	29%

Of the fourteen teachers surveyed about 57% felt that students were demonstrating reading comprehension difficulties on comprehension tests. Another 14% were undecided, but expressed in their comment uncertainty about reading comprehension. Of the 57% that answered negatively to the first question about 88% felt that the testing format was part of the problem. Of the total teacher population surveyed 64% believed that if assessment choices were offered, students would exhibit better comprehension skills. The approximately 29% undecided on this question were unsure as to what would help the stated problem.

The researchers chose 24 students from three fifth grade classrooms to serve as the intervention group. Two of the classrooms were classified as resource special education classrooms with eight students in each. The third participating class was a standard classroom where eight students were randomly selected. Of the 24 students in the intervention group 60% displayed reading comprehension scores below grade level. The students who scored at grade level equaled 28% with only 12 % showing abilities above grade level. Figure one displays a summary of the achievement test scores of the intervention group as of spring, 1997.

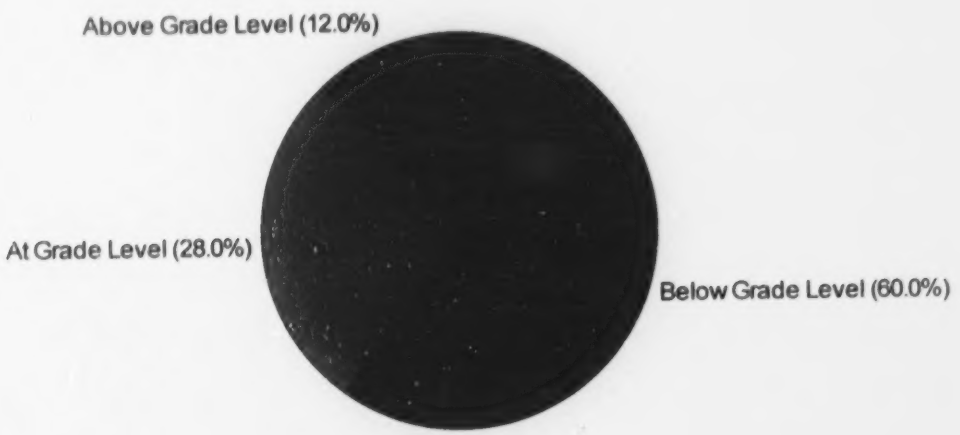

Figure 1. Achievement scores from spring 1997.

Probable Causes

Probable site-based causes of the problem are varied. One is concerned with student population. The targeted school has a diverse ethnic and cultural attendance base as stated in the school report card. This is displayed in Figure 2.

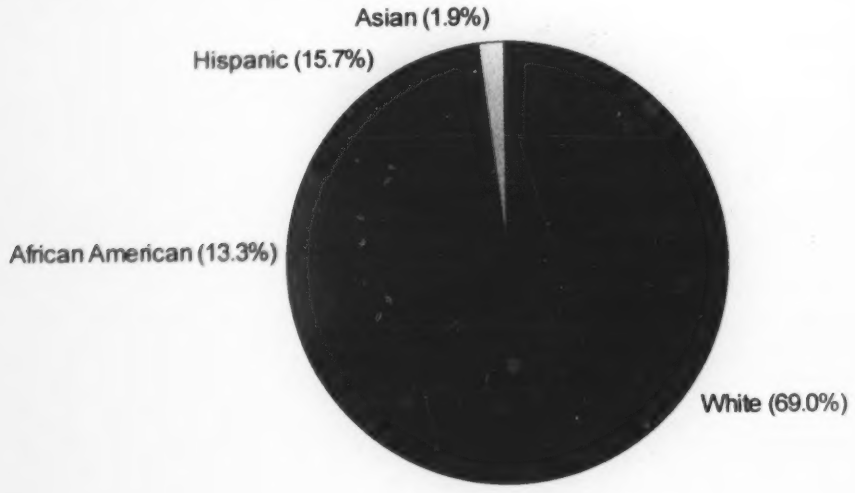

Figure 2. Ethnic diversity from School Report Card.

Student success in attempts at whole group cohesiveness parallels this ethnic diversity. The family life patterns and cultural practices present in the student's home environment can be seen in that student's daily activities. This environmental influence affects the student's approach to thinking and often differs from other students' assessment of the same classroom lesson.

In the school report card it is also noted that the rate of student mobility in the area is high which causes a lack of continuity in the student's learning pattern. The mobility rate of approximately 30% indicates that classrooms contain students with broken patterns of learning. These interrupted patterns may result in inconsistent student learning.

Lack of motivation is another cause of underachievement. The researchers have noted that students seem disinterested in classroom tasks. When talking informally with colleagues the same concerns were expressed about students with non-caring attitudes. The need to feel like a constant entertainer to keep student interest has been continuously repeated in the staff lounge.

The teacher is competing with too many outside influences. Often times students are failing because of missing assignments not low grades on individual assignment. Consequences are usually given for missing assignments. The negative consequences seem to have little effect, as those who are failing usually continue failing. Even if the consequence is a detention to finish the assignment the student often doesn't complete it to raise the grade.

Traditional testing results have failed to show accurately a student's knowledge. The district's encouragement of traditional teaching and testing methods does not take into account individual learning styles nor alternative methods of assessment. The district's policy mandates the use of a basal reading series. A curricular shift from a phonics based series to the whole language series appears to have had a negative impact on student achievement scores based on the student's permanent records.

Researchers have seen indications that another possible cause of poor reading comprehension is the transition from an elementary self-contained classroom to the departmentalized middle school. Teachers have observed that this transition has posed an organizational and emotional challenge for some students. Not remembering to bring the necessary materials to class from the student's homeroom can impact negatively their ability to attend and participate successfully.

A literature search supported several of the listed site-based causes. An article by Williams and Woods stated that when children come to school having different experiential backgrounds they do not learn the same way as teachers have been led to believe (1997). Due to the diverse ethnic, cultural, and economic background of the students not all children have been read to by their parents or talked to about their surroundings. Teachers have assumed mistakenly that all of their students have been exposed to museums, zoos, and parks. Some children have a limited source of experiences to relate to stories and themes presented in classrooms lessons. Without the experience of hearing and engaging in conversations about a variety of topics some children have more difficulty sequencing ideas, predicting outcomes, and making inferences.

Teachers have often believed that all students can function competitively as is the case with traditional testing. Rimm stated that underachievers do not have internal controls nor do they do well competitively (1997). The slower performing students sink under the competitive pressure to a level of non-performance. Often the low-level learner is unaware of the pressure consciously, but reacts poorly all the same. The scores of the underachievers are consistently lower when compared to those of higher achievers who took the test at the same time under the same conditions.

On the other side of the learning partnership, teachers need to feel free to use new ways of assessment and application in their own situation (Kane and Khattri 1995). Instead of feeling as though they must use district mandated materials to cover a certain amount of content by a given time, teachers should have the freedom to stop, reteach, and rethink a topic if satisfactory skills are not achieved.

Fuchs agreed with this teaching plan and went on to reinforce the idea of background knowledge, especially in the area of school progress, as a means to making better decisions concerning the student's future (1995). If assessments are to be used authentically they should be used as tools in the decision making process, not just as final assessments. In other words, after an assessment is given a teacher should decide areas that need further work and then go back and focus on them. In this way students will have further, deeper exposure to skills they did not originally understand.

Further research is needed into the debate between authentic assessment and traditional testing. Research is needed in the classroom where a more direct comparison of the same material can be made by administering the two types of assessment. Literature bears out the presence of confusion and leads a researcher to want more data to consider. Each method of assessment seems to have found its place in education, but traditional testing occupies a far wider realm of acceptance and use. The movement of authentic assessment into the classrooms on a larger scale needs to be studied before the time, money, and effort is expended to popularize the concept.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

According to Wiggins, traditional testing is basically a way to evaluate factual data (as cited in Burke, 1994). During World War I the Army developed the Army Alpha test to rate the potential ability of nearly two million enlisted men. The results were used for selection and deployment. The Army's use of this multiple choice test altered the later development of educational testing in this country (Popham, 1993). In the years that followed, educators began realizing that this type of standardized assessment was more valid than individual class transcripts or report cards. The standardized achievement tests, for example, can compare one student from the East Coast against one student from the West Coast equitably. Transcripts, however, reflected what a teacher felt about a particular student in a class at that time. Archbald and Newman found that a transcript offered no correlation to a stable standard of excellence (as cited in Burke, 1994). From this attitude grew the development of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) by the College Entrance Examination Board in 1926. The SAT has given colleges an efficient and economical instrument for selecting the best students for admission to their institutions. This test score was perceived by Schudson to give a better indication of future college success than the transcript (as cited in Burke, 1994). Achievement testing has been governed primarily by a multiple choice assessment strategy to the present time.

State legislatures soon began to make laws that mandated the use of some form of standardized testing of students at all grade levels according to Herman (as cited in Worthen,

1993, p. 444-453). These test scores have been used to judge the value of the education being provided by individual schools. Some school administrators have stated that student test scores have been used as one component in determining merit pay for teachers. School districts are judged also by these student test scores when being considered for federal and state funded programs. The whole state school system is evaluated also by state test scores in the area of public opinion. However, testing just to meet these mandated requirements should not be encouraged as the main purpose of evaluation (Illinois State Board of Education, 1995). The test results easily could present skewed pictures of what is really happening in a particular classroom or district. Brown stated that the common practice is to use traditional scores to predict educational growth or assess current success (as cited in Burke, 1994). For this reason, the paper and pencil type test is entrenched firmly in the public mind as the best measurement instrument for everything from a reading unit test to a job application to the SAT.

Many things can be said for the traditional objective test. It is given easily to classes because of the familiar format and scripted directions. With only one acceptable answer for each objective question each student's results can be compared readily with peers. Minimal time is spent away from teaching because the test is administered and scored with little difficulty. The use of published tests eliminates teacher preparation time. Even when the teacher prepares an objective test, the straight one answer for one question format takes little preparation time. Another favorable fact noted by Archbald and Newman is the built-in credibility of objective tests (as cited in Burke, 1994). The efficiency of these tests is appreciated by educators because of how little they cost in time, which inevitably translates into dollars (Worthen, 1993, p. 444-453).

Drawbacks to this objective style of testing are numerous. Ferrara and McTighe found that often this kind of test is used so that a teacher can meet the accountability demanded by the administration or the state (1992). This attitude ignores the opportunity to use a test as a learning instrument, not just an evaluation tool. Sacrificing educational soundness for the sake of high scores makes the testing effort all but meaningless (Wiggins, 1993).

Another large disadvantage in the use of standardized testing as a way to rate a teacher, school, district, or state is that emphasis of instruction falls only on testable information (Travis, 1996). The test areas become the center of curriculum even when not consciously targeted. Educators do not want to have poor test results reflect on their teaching, so lessons are planned to cover the material on the test either directly or indirectly (Worthen, 1993, p. 444-453). Cases have been documented where teachers were encouraged by their administrators to stop in the middle of a timed test to teach a concept if the students seemed to be doing poorly.

Teachers need to know more about their students' ability to perform tasks, not just which dot they represent on a graph of test scores (Abruscato, 1993). Using the exact same question style, the exact same sitting-in-a-desk posture, the exact same scoring system, or the exact same controlled time does not reflect an individual student's ability to think (Murphy, 1995). These objective tests provide a peek into very few areas of students' metacognition. This is not a test of what the student knows or how he knows it, but only of his recall. Insight is needed into how the student can exhibit knowledge by accomplishing true reasoning tasks (Worthen, 1993, p. 444-453). Traditional testing has a place in the total educational picture, but only as one of many available assessment styles. Wiggins stated that to use traditional testing as the only source of mental measurement was like a physician using only a pulse rate to determine a patient's total health profile (as cited in Travis, 1996).

New ways to assess learning, particularly in the area of reading, are now being explored. Interest in better assessment tools comes from a growing disappointment in the data generated by standardized scores. Chittenden made note that attention to improved assessment methods is being encouraged by current research in the areas of language arts and cognitive awareness (as cited in Murphy, 1995). Even standardized tests have indicated to us that background knowledge has significant influence over a student's success on reading tests (Murphy, 1995). How this background knowledge is used in processing new information or solving new situations has become the current trend in education.

The need has risen to develop a test that measures the students' ability to create solutions that display their acquired knowledge or skills (Elliot, 1995). A testing method, which illustrates through the student's responses their background knowledge and intellectual strengths, could meet this need (Feuer and Fulton, 1993). It would be necessary for the student to construct the answer rather that just pick out the most familiar option (Farr, 1991). Costa stated that situations needed to be set up where the student must use strategic reasoning, intuition, determination, creativity and artistry to work out solutions (1994). A type of testing that measures directly, not indirectly, through performance and the use of thinking strategies could be a more valid indicator of a student's ability (McDonald, 1993). The results could even lead to improved teaching procedures (Sweet and Zimmerman, 1992).

Multiple sources of assessment should be the common practice in order to balance the test validity. An instructor should not depend solely on the paper and pencil type of test and expect to see a clear picture of the student's actual abilities (Ferrera and McTighe, 1992). A true assessment must represent all areas of work that are necessary to accomplish a task meaningfully stated Arch and New (as cited in Burke, 1994). This assessment must be an authentic representation, or it is of no value to the student or the teacher.

Terms for this new kind of assessment are numerous and often interchangeable. Most of these terms indicate the same basic style of testing. Some researchers refer to this new assessment as: portfolio assessment, performance-based assessment, or authentic assessment (Murphy, 1995). Others who are studying this kind of testing use terms like: direct assessment, performance assessment, or alternative assessment (Worthen, 1993, p. 444-453). For purposes of this paper the term authentic assessment will be used exclusively. Authentic assessment is defined as any alternative to traditional objective measurement.

Authentic assessments are not new. Forms of this type of assessment have been in evidence since early educational records were kept. Socrates held oral examinations as a tool for authentically assessing a student's knowledge. Elementary teachers have kept anecdotal notes on

students on an ongoing basis. Folders for individual students to catalog their work in certain class subjects have been used as a teaching tool for many years. Evaluating a student's product always has been an integral part of classes in music, art, dramatics, speech, and physical education (Worthen, 1993, p. 444-453).

Society in general and the business community specifically are clamoring for schools to do more than place students on a test grid based on their achievement scores. The real world wants more competent citizens. Consequently, the responsibility falls on the school system to help students meet that challenge (Stiggins, 1995). All of these demands have inundated school districts with mandated assessment changes, calls for noncognitive outcomes, new textbook approaches to assessment, school reform initiatives, and requirements of accountability (Cizek, 1995). Tentative steps by Illinois and Wisconsin into finding alternatives to traditional testing were made. The inclusion of some open ended response questions among the usual multiple choice types were added to their state mandated testing programs (Murphy, 1995). Many states have followed Illinois and Wisconsin and further improved on those initial attempts. It will take many trials and rewrites before any authentic tests are fully developed and used globally. The main focus must be upon finding a fair way to assess the intelligence of the students in terms of their direct performance, not the indirect traditional manner (Gardner, 1995).

The use of authentic assessment tools could tap into the different ways that students learn. Gardner wrote of the existence of multiple intelligences. These areas of intelligence cover seven primary ways in which a particular student seems to learn best. The seven areas are verbal/linguistic, musical/rhythmic, logical/mathematical, bodily/ kinesthetic, visual/spatial, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Focusing on these areas of strength can enable the teacher to get a glimpse of learning previously considered nonexistent. By offering students a variety of ways to relate their learned lessons, the teacher can get a clearer picture of that student's ability. Authentic tools show how a variety of student products could reveal insight into the minds of the creator (Burke, Fogarty, and Belgrad, 1994).

Authentic assessment tools could include various forms of presenting information. Examples of some forms are live performances, journals, class and individual projects, oral presentations, experiments, and portfolios (Travis, 1996). Analyzing a class will help the teacher determine which and how many designs to use and incorporate in the teaching plan. Other factors must be considered when choosing an assessment. Factors include the subject being taught, class length, class frequency, preparation time available both for students and teacher, rubric assessments of the procedure, and translation of that assessment into the school grade reporting system.

The portfolio is a universal word for a type of teaching tool. Both the student and the teacher use portfolios in various ways. In the portfolio's most general use, it is a place to catalog student materials that have been displayed, collected, or produced (Farr, 1991). The portfolio should include reflections on readings and writings the student has done. These reflections should show an extension of the students' everyday experiences (1991). If the portfolio is only a storage notebook, it has little worth. The selection of material to include should be done with care, and consideration should be given to any future use of that material (Burke, Fogarty, and Belgrad, 1994). Students should be included in judging their best work. Research has shown that when students were asked to rate critically their best work, they skimmed lightly through the process. When asked to include pieces of work that showed minimal effort, the depth of the students' critical thinking improved (Farr, 1991).

Portfolios, which contain blended reading and writing samples, show recognition of the connection between the two subjects. Krest and Valencia observed that if reading and writing objectives are shared the assessment of the student products becomes a worthy learning tool (as cited in Farr, 1991). Teacher-student conferences over this collection of material can be another assessment and opportunity for student growth (Farr, 1991).

Journals can be an independent authentic activity or part of the portfolio. The students' writings and reflections can be kept in the journal to be analyzed and evaluated from time to time.

The teacher may use the students' journals in all the above mentioned ways for purposes of conferencing, monitoring work progress, and evaluation.

Testing in an authentic way is another available tool. Even a teacher-made test requiring written responses can be phrased to stimulate higher level thinking. After reading a story, students could be asked to write a letter to one of the characters describing a solution to a problem that had been presented in the story. The story problem now becomes a real life situation, which encourages the student to think the problem through to a conclusion. The student response will show the amount of understanding gleaned from the reading (Farr, 1991).

Authentic assessment has criticisms. One criticism concerns how long this new wave of authentic assessment will last. Educators have always been quick to come up with new ideas for classroom improvement. Some of these academic propositions were the answer to every learning need, according to their proponents, but time proved them unpopular for various reasons. Critics of authentic assessment want some guarantee that this form of assessment will not go the way of some of its instructional predecessors.

Clarity of concept and definition of terms is another concern. Instead of always hailing the praise of authentic assessment, sponsors of authentic assessment need to clearly state the purpose of the concept. Herman noted that the authentic assessment campaign for educational improvement must present itself in positives terms, not just as the antithesis of traditional testing (as cited in Worthen, 1993, p. 444-453). The new assessment method is at risk as long as the terms and concepts are murky (1993). This ambiguity opens the door for educators to use the authentic assessment theories to fit individual purposes rather than its consistent intended use. As these clarifications come forth the arguments of teaching to the assessment rubric will be no different than the previous use of teaching to the test (1993).

A serious question concerns the extra time and money using the authentic assessment method takes. The excessive administration time is reason enough for condemnation of the whole procedure by some educators (Worthen, 1993, p. 444-453). Critics of authentic assessment use

this logic to condemn authentic assessment as being impractical to most districts (1993). Without adequate district provided planning time, teachers may shy away from authentic assessment for monetary reasons.

Incomparable grading of the students is the strongest argument being proffered against authentic assessment. Traditional grades are subjective and arbitrary (Travis, 1996). District administrators and the public generally holds grades or other universal achievement scales in high esteem (Worthen, 1993, p.455-456). The school personnel wants easily interpreted information when it comes to grades on papers, tests, or report cards (Worthen, 1993, p. 444-453). Cizek believed that there exists a doubt that authentic assessment will be held to the same high standards as traditional testing (as cited in Worthen, 1993, p. 444-453) and reported in a manageable and easy-to-compare manner.

Authentic assessment advocates have to deal with the above concerns. Leaving unaddressed issues adds to the validity of their opponents' claims. People in the areas of instruction and assessment must consider also the intrinsic and extrinsic factors affecting the student. The factors to be considered are the background influences of the student on comprehension of reading, how the student mentally manipulates that prior knowledge, how the student creates the meaning, what skills the student needs to learn to proceed, what methods and medium are being used, and the setting in which the reading occurs (Dutcher, 1990).

There has been a shift in the way researchers and teachers think about reading, which gives students a more active role in the reading comprehension process. This shift is reflected in changes from basal reading programs to hands-on experiences based on books; and from emphasis on isolated skills to practical applications of reading and writing activities (Sebranek and Kemper, 1985). The charge of authentic assessment proponents now is to invent ways to assess student learning directly where the student truly becomes the benefactor (Travis, 1996). There is a special need in the area of reading comprehension. Too often, only the verbal/linguistic learner succeeds because the test over reading material is given in the traditional manner. The alternative learners

have no way to express their knowledge of the content being assessed. Educators must seek new ways to assess all learners fairly, and to that end the researchers will implement interventions within reading classes that will enable students to demonstrate understanding of the reading material.

Project Objectives

As a result of the inclusion of alternative teaching strategies, during the period of September 1997 through December 1997, the fifth grade students from the targeted language arts classes will increase their ability to demonstrate understanding of reading content as measured by teacher made authentic assessments, graphic organizers, and teacher observation.

Processes to achieve these objectives are:

Incorporate instructional materials for alternative teaching strategies by using graphic organizers.

Develop new assessment materials that foster use of alternative student responses.

Implement these new assessment materials.

As a result of the utilizing of student portfolios, during the period of September 1997 through December 1997, the fifth grade students from the targeted language arts classes will increase their ability to evaluate their comprehension as measured by a teacher made rubric of the portfolio and student journals.

Processes to achieve these objectives are:

Apply procedures in maintaining student portfolios in the classroom.

Incorporate instructional materials for alternative teaching strategies.

Design evaluation instruments to assess student portfolios and journals.

As a result of using portfolios, graphic organizers, and journals, during the period of September 1997 through December 1997, the 24 fifth grade students from the targeted language arts classes will increase reading grades as measured by the comparative scores on authentic assessment instruments and traditional tests over the same content.

Processes to achieve these objectives are:

Develop authentic assessment instruments to evaluate reading content.

Develop traditional teacher made objective tests to evaluate reading comprehension.

Apply this new classroom testing procedures.

Project Action Plan

The following is an explanation of the processes to be applied:

1. Graphic organizers will be taught to familiarize the students with their applications. The students will practice using organizers in non-reading content areas. The purpose of this practice is so students will recognize them as tools for all subject areas not just reading tools.

2. Teachers will present these graphic organizers so that students may use them to answer reading content questions.

3. The teacher will introduce student portfolios and their purpose taught. The students at the direction of the teacher will do periodic maintenance checks. A rubric will be included to assist the students in their own evaluation of the portfolio. Possible examples of what may be kept in portfolios are journals, reflections, graphic organizers, illustrations, self-assessments, and a rubric.

4. Traditional objective and authentic assessments will be developed and administered on an ongoing basis according to the content need. The authentic assessments will consist of four parts with the students choosing which three of the four parts they will complete. Assessments will be given in three two-week increments and two-three week increments on material covered to that point or since the last assessment. These test data will be accumulated and compared at the end of the intervention period.

The following action plan was designed to implement three major solution components. The components are the inclusion of alternative teaching strategies, the use of student portfolios, and the comparison of traditional and authentic assessment instruments in the area of reading

comprehension. This study was undertaken because of teacher dissatisfaction with students' ability to demonstrate comprehension in the traditional manner. Declining district reading scores further validated teacher opinions.

This action plan will cover an approximate twelve-week time span in three fifth grade classrooms, including 16 students from two resource classrooms and eight randomly selected students from a standard classroom. Given the fact that holidays, assemblies, field trips, and other intraschool activities or emergencies interrupt the school week, the researchers will need to be flexible in their implementation timeline.

I. Weeks 1 and 2

A. Introduce the use of two graphic organizers.

1. Character Web
2. Acrostic

B. Students will be reading grade appropriate material one to one and a half hours a week in class.

1. Tall tales - Paul Bunyan
2. Tall tales - Pecos Bill
3. Listening - John Henry
4. Listening - Stormalong

C. At the end of the two weeks a traditional objective assessment and an authentic assessment will be administered (Appendix B).

II. Weeks 3 and 4

A. Introduce the use of one graphic organizer.

1. Sequencing chart

B. Students will be reading grade appropriate material one to one and a half hours a week in class.

1. The Pinballs
2. Chalk Box Kid
3. A Deadly Game

C. Present and establish portfolio use with teacher-made rubric (Appendix C).

D. Students make journal entries for up to thirty minutes per week.

E. At the end of the two weeks a traditional objective assessment and an authentic assessment will be administered.

III. Weeks 5 through 10

A. Introduce the use of one graphic organizer every three weeks.

1. Venn diagram
2. Story pyramid

B. Students will be reading grade appropriate material one to one and a half hours a week in class.

C. Portfolio maintenance time allotted for ten to fifteen minutes per week.

D. Students make journal entries for up to thirty minutes per week.

E. At the end of each three week time period a traditional objective assessment and authentic assessment will be administered.

IV. Weeks 11 through 12

A. Introduce the use of one graphic organizer during the two weeks.

1. Thinking at right angles

B. Students will be reading grade appropriate material one to one and half hours a week

In class.

C. Portfolio maintenance time allotted for ten to fifteen minutes per week.

D. Students make journal entries for up to thirty minutes per week.

E. At the end of the two weeks time period a traditional objective assessment and an authentic assessment will be administered.

Methods of Assessment

In order to determine the effects of the intervention, teachers will compile the results of the assessments, portfolio rubrics, and teacher reflections.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The first objective of this research was that students from the targeted language arts classes would increase their ability to demonstrate comprehension of reading content. The second objective was that the targeted students would increase their ability to evaluate their comprehension progress. The final objective was that reading scores would increase in the targeted group. The implementation of three major solution components was selected to effect the desired changes. The components were the inclusion of alternative teaching strategies through graphic organizers, student portfolios, and the comparison of traditional and authentic assessments.

Graphic organizers were taught as student tools to be used to demonstrate comprehension and also used as an assessment tool for the researchers. The graphic organizers were taught to the whole group as a technique for use in all subject areas. The introduction of each graphic organizer was presented as an independent lesson in an unrelated area of application. In the first two weeks the students were exposed to and taught to manipulate a character web and an acrostic. During the remainder of the twelve-week intervention period the group was introduced to a sequencing chart, Venn diagram, story pyramid, and right angle. Original plans called for the inclusion of one graphic organizer for each two-week novel unit. Three weeks into the intervention the researchers adjusted the action plan to accommodate for the amount of material that needed to be covered. This adjustment resulted in three two-week units and two three-week units instead of the

originally proposed plan of six two-week units. The purpose of teaching the students to use graphic organizers was to arm them with a tool to demonstrate comprehension of content information. The organizers then became measurement tools on the final unit assessment. Copies of these graphic organizers can be found in Appendix D. After becoming acquainted with enough graphic organizers, students were allowed to select three out of a field of four as their final assessment.

Student portfolios were begun in week three as a folder to save artifacts from each unit and house a journal. Journal writing was done weekly for a total of thirty minutes beginning in week four. These writings were reflective of the students' comprehension of selected story passages. Portfolios were maintained during an allotted ten to fifteen minute time period per week. A teacher made rubric was given and explained to the students and kept in the portfolio.

Comprehension comparisons were made through the use of teacher made objective tests contrasting with the authentic assessment methods previously described. Included in the objective tests were multiple choice questions, true/false statements, fill in the blank sentences, and matching terms. The researchers chose to compare end of unit results as opposed to the pre and post test method. This method seemed to be more applicable to the information being sought. At the end of each unit both test styles were administered. In order to be impartial the researchers alternated the order in which the tests were given. Sample copies of the type of tests administered can be found in Appendix B.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

In order to assess the effects of authentic assessments on student comprehension of reading units, researchers kept a record of scores. The authentic scores were compared with the objective scores at the completion of each unit as parallel data. These data were compiled and are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Comparison of Number of Students Having Higher Authentic or Higher Objective Unit Scores

Tests	Authentic	Objective	No Difference	No Score Available
Unit 1	12	9	0	3
Unit 2	16	5	1	2
Unit 3	19	3	0	2
Unit 4	15	5	1	3
Unit 5	12	6	2	4

The intervention appeared to have had a positive effect on a majority of the students from the targeted group. The overall outcome of each unit test showed more students able to successfully respond in the authentic mode than in the traditional objective style. Some students consistently did better on the authentic style test while others fluctuated between the two styles. In three of the five units, there were students who showed no difference in their performance scores.

During the intervention period there were several variables that contributed to the number of scores available for comparison. These are evident in the last column of Table 2. These numbers reflect students missing the tests. Because of truancy and suspensions there was an extended lapse of time between the original test date and the students' return to school. Therefore, a make-up test would not have been valid. Early in the intervention period one of the students moved, and his lack of scores was counted on Table 2 as a score not available.

The researchers noted from the data in Table 2 that the number of students who performed better on authentic assessments was higher than the number of students performing better on objective assessments. When all student test scores for each unit were averaged, a

positive relationship became evident in support of our original objective. This information is illustrated in Figure 3.

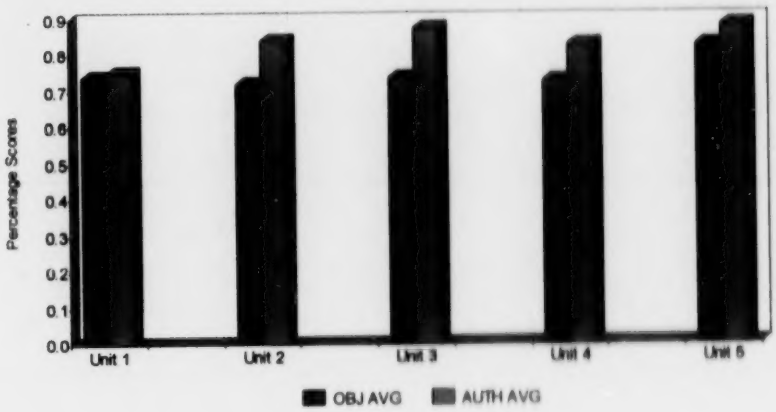

Figure 3. Class averages on unit tests.

The researchers concluded from the data that there were positive effects from the intervention. When the student scores were averaged for the whole class, these results were evident. These averages revealed a notable difference in favor of authentic assessment as a better tool to demonstrate student comprehension.

The practice of maintaining student portfolios and journals was useful in helping the student in self-evaluation and organization. The teacher-made rubric aided the students in focusing on necessary components to be included for appraisal. The researchers felt that over the time of the implementation, the student's ability to select additional artifacts for inclusion in their portfolios improved. Portfolio and journal use was intended by the researchers to be a maintenance tool for self-evaluation and reflection through creative expression, not as an assessment tool.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the presentation and analysis of the data on comprehension test score comparisons, the majority of the students performed better on authentic assessment tests. The use of graphic organizers to express each student's interpretations of the material, proved to be an

excellent bridge between learned information and application to new situations. Since the graphic organizers were introduced in a noncontent area, the students were required to apply the organizer to the new information in the context of the unit.

The researchers concluded from the data that not all students performed better on the authentic assessment during all unit evaluations. Those students with higher objective test scores exhibited discomfort with the less structured style provided on the authentic tests. They seemed to perform better within the boundaries set in an objective test.

Based upon interpretation of the data by the reseachers, teachers should use authentic assessments as an evaluation tool. The overuse of this or any other assessment tool exclusively is not recommended. Students learn in various ways and reflect that learning in as many various ways. Therefore, no one style of evaluation will accurately measure all students' comprehension. Our study showed an overall higher performance in the class averages when measured by authentic means, but this did not hold true for certain individual students.

The researchers found the use of portfolios and journal writing to be an enhancement of the learning process. The students were able to reflect on their own learning through their writings and gathering of artifacts. Portfolios and journals at a supplemental level enriched the total authentic experience, but were neither necessary nor essential in the success of this research. The researchers recommend using portfolios and journals on an as needed basis.

Teachers using authentic assessments should give consideration to the amount of time necessary. When planning units teachers will have to provide additional time before implementation. Authentic preparation requires long term planning, pre-establishing rubrics, creating or selecting graphic organizers, and designing final assessments. During the actual instruction teachers will find that this preparation time was well spent. The lesson will flow smoothly since the teacher has involved the students in their own learning. The targeted students in this research verbally expressed and wrote in their journals positive comments about the choices they were free to make on the authentic instrument. Additional time should be allotted

when grading the final assessments. Because multiple answers are acceptable on an authentic instrument the teacher must evaluate each student's paper independent of the other students.

In conclusion, the researchers recommend the use of authentic assessment as a means of measuring student comprehension. The success shown by this research was encouraging. Thus, we do not hesitate to recommend, with modifications such as those mentioned above, this approach. Of course, further research is needed to evaluate other factors that could influence student comprehension.

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Appendix A

Sample of Informal Teacher Survey

Teacher Survey

By B. Jill Cross, Tracy Greer, and mary Pearce

1. Generally, do 5th grade students successfully demonstrate reading comprehension on story tests?

yes _____ no _____ undecided _____

Comments: _____

_____

_____

2. If no, then could the test form be part of the problem?

yes _____ no _____ undecided _____

Comments: _____

_____

_____

3. Would students show more success if assessment choices were offered? (cooperative projects, visuals, rhymes, etc.)?

yes _____ no _____ undecided _____

Comments: _____

_____

_____

Character Web for _____

(name of book)

1. Draw and/or name a character in the center circle.
2. Write three character traits in the surrounding rectangles.
3. Find examples from the book that tell specifically what this character did or said that supports the traits you picked. Write these in the ovals.

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Appendix B

Example of a Graphic Organizer Used as an Authentic Test

Character Web

Appendix B

Example of a Graphic Organizer Used as an Authentic Test

Acrostic

Directions: Create an acrostic using facts about tall tales. Use complete sentences. Begin each sentence with the letter given.

F _____

_____

O _____

_____

L _____

_____

K _____

_____

H _____

_____

E _____

_____

R _____

_____

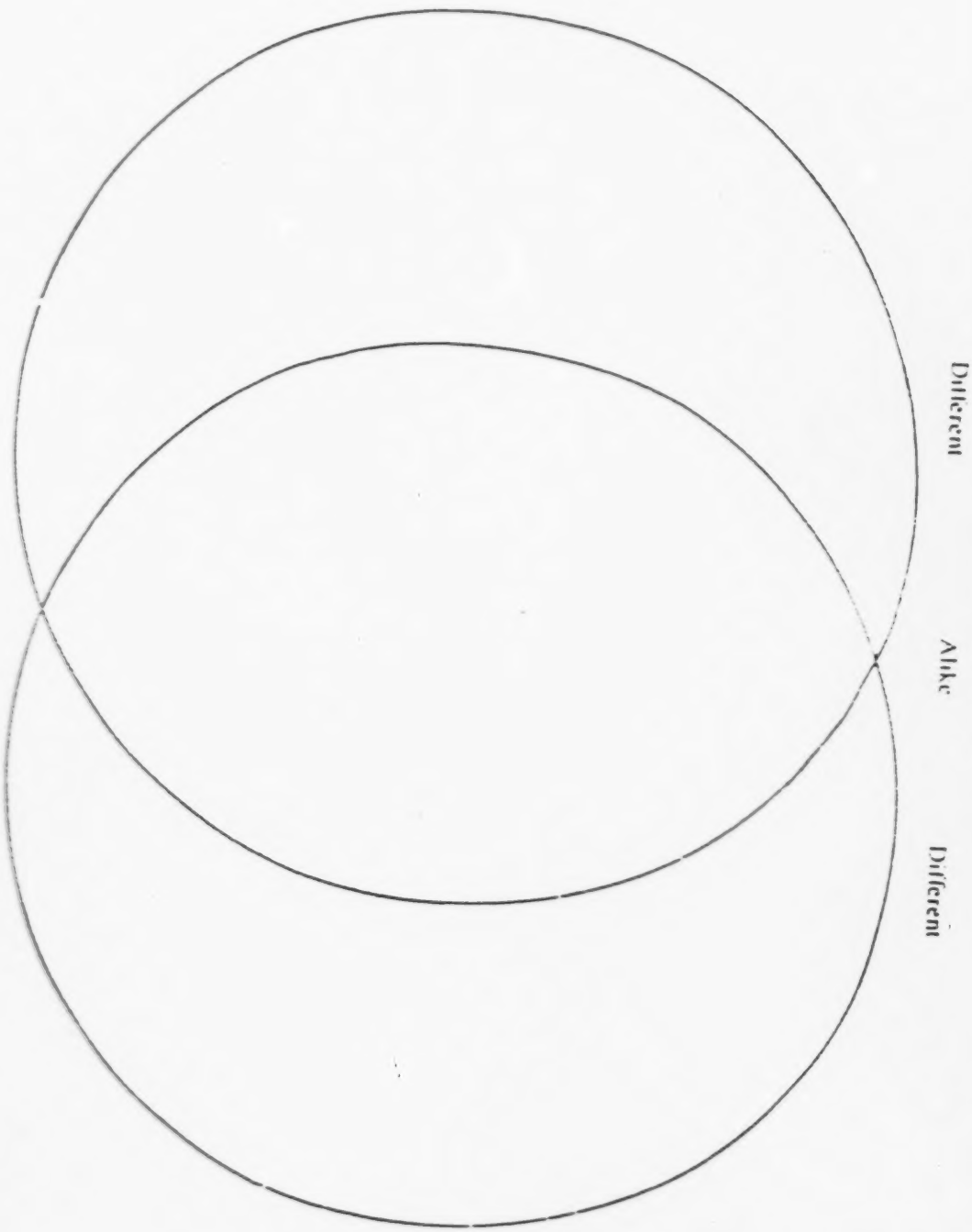
O _____

_____

Appendix B

Example of a Graphic Organizer Used as an Authentic Assessment

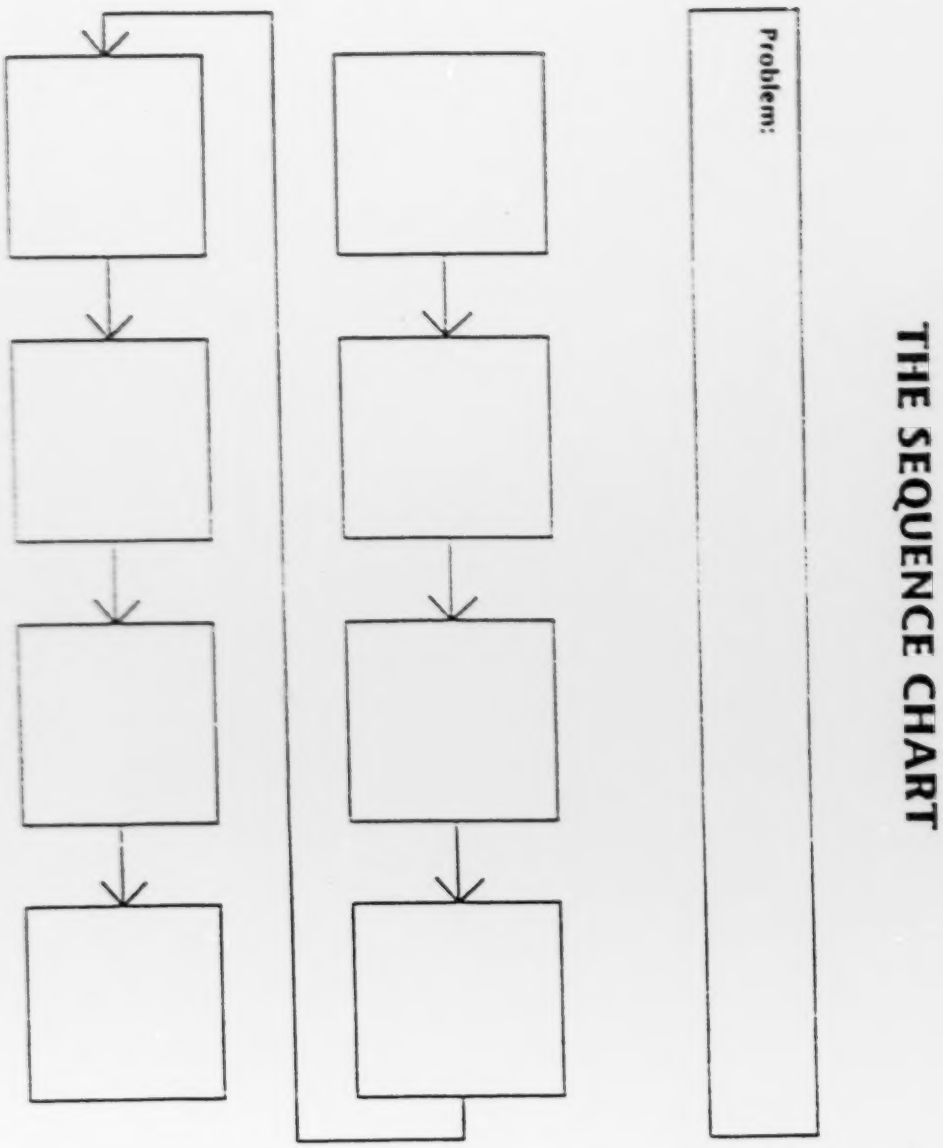
Venn Diagram



Appendix B

Example of a Graphic Organizer Used as an Authentic Assessment

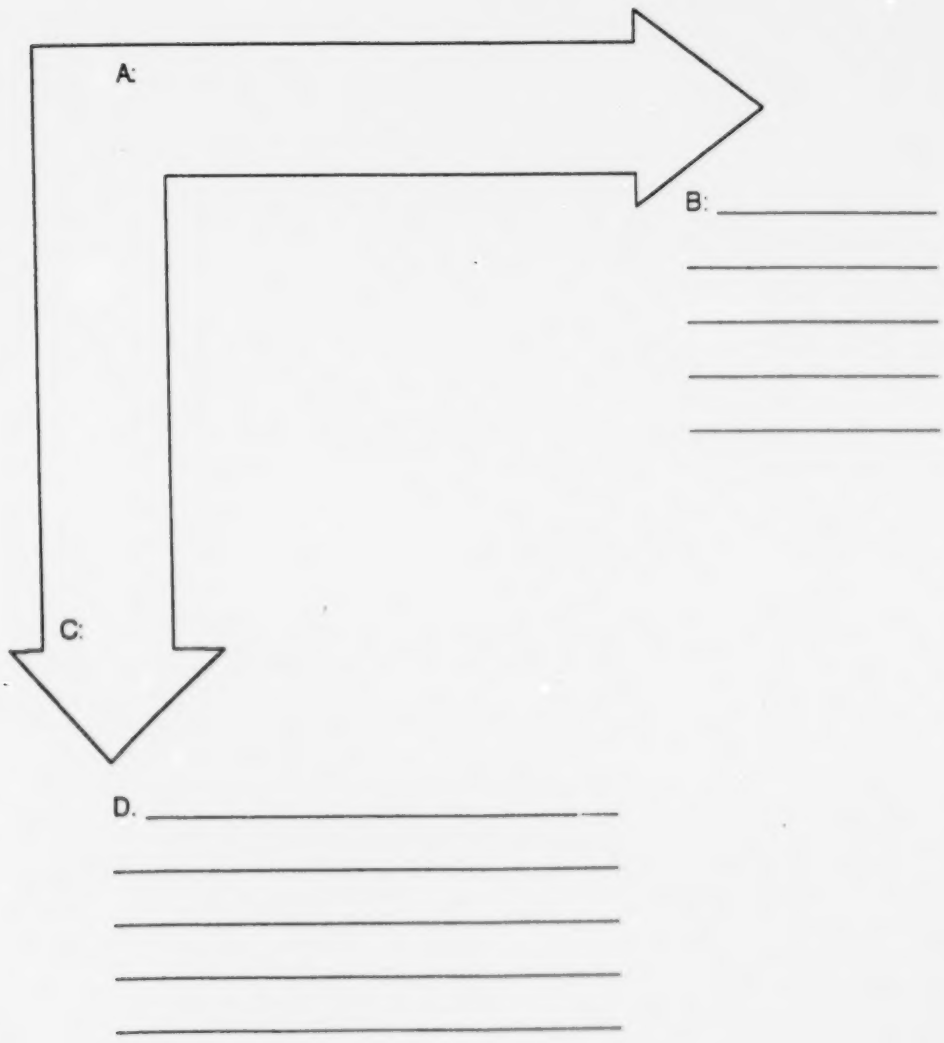
Sequencing



Appendix B

Example of a Graphic Organizer Used as an Authentic Assessment

Right Angle Thinking



Appendix B

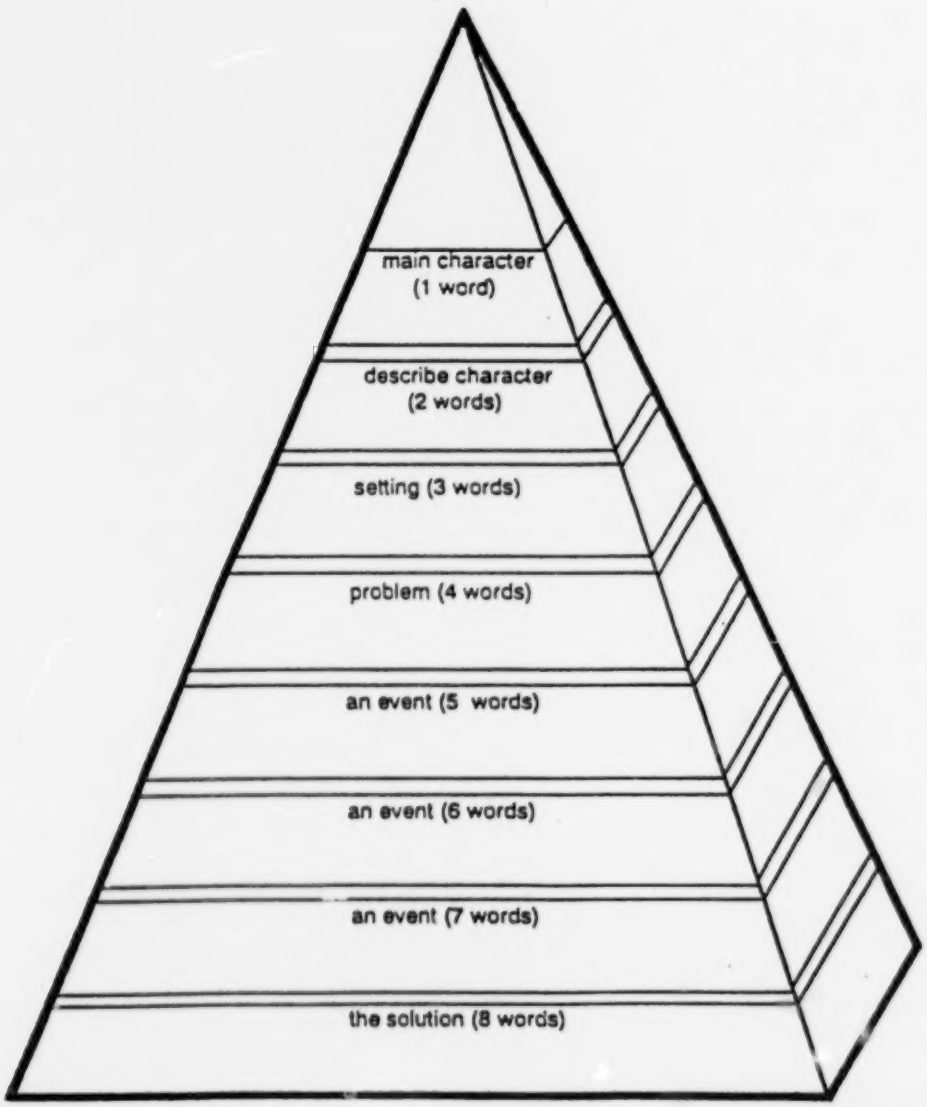
Blank Letter Form Used as an Authentic Test

Appendix B

Graphic Organizer Used as an Authentic Test

Story Pyramid

Title of the book: _____



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#285 Thematic Unit — Native Americans

Appendix B

Example of Objective Test

Tall Tales Test

MULTIPLE CHOICE - choose the word or group of words that best complete each sentence. Circle the letter of your choice.

1. Tall tales originated in
    a. Europe.
    b. China.
    c. North America.

2. An example of hyperbole is...
    a. I was so tired I slept all night.
    b. I was so tired I slept for a month.
    c. I was so tired I slept for three days.

3. Tall tales are
    a. both fact and fiction.
    b. all fact.
    c. all fiction.

4. Paul Bunyan found Babe in
    a. a mountain cave.
    b. a Blue Snow.
    c. the state of Maine.

5. Pecos Bill first saw Slu-Foot Sue
    a. riding two blue hump back whales.
    b. while riding the cyclone.
    c. riding a huge catfish.

6. John Henry was
    a. bigger and stronger than most other men.
    b. an unhappy single man.
    c. not able to keep up with other workers on the railroad.

7. Stormalong walked West with a(n)
    a. octopus.
    b. oar on his shoulder.
    c. soap in his pocket.

Objective Tall Tales Test continued

8. Tall tales are known by the use of
   a. exaggeration.
   b. real facts.
   c. sad endings.

9. Pecos bill did not invent
   a. the six-shooter.
   b. the lasso.
   c. the Grand Canyon.

10. Every time Babe needed new shoes
   a. the leather factories ran out of leather.
   b. a new iron mine had to be opened.
   c. Paul Bunyan bought them at a store.

TRUE/FALSE - Write **true** if the statement is true. Write **false** if the statement is false.

_____11. Pecos Bill was raised by wolves.

_____12. Alfred B. Stormalong was happiest on the sea.

_____13. Paul Bunyan snored so loudly the seagulls thought a storm was coming.

_____14. John Henry would not help his fellow workers drive steel.

_____15. All tall tale heroes are unusual in some way.

_____16. Pecos Bill drank cow milk as a baby.

_____17. Stormalong never owned his own clipper ship.

_____18. John Henry was married.

_____19. Pecos Bill lassoed a hurricane to end the drought.

_____20. Pecos Bill married Slue-Foot Sue.

Objective Tall Tales Test continued

FILL IN THE BLANK - Choose a word to complete each sentence.

21. Paul Bunyan went to the Iron Works in _____ to have a griddle made.
22. When Stormalong was a farmer he grew _____.
23. John Henry was born with a _____ in his hand.
24. Pecos Bill used a _____ for his first lasso.
25. Stormalong fought a two-ton _____.
26. Widow-Maker was Peco Bill's _____.
27. To prove that North Dakota had fertile land, Paul Bunyan planted _____.
28. When Babe spilled the tank of water it formed the _____ River.
29. Pecos Bill taught the _____ how to lasso, brand cattle, sing, and do many other things.
30. Stormalong used _____ to slip through the cliffs of Dover.

Appendix C

Sample Portfolio Rubric

A. ARTIFACTS

EXCEEDS REQUIREMENTS (8 or more)	MEETS REQUIREMENTS (7 to 5 total)	DOES NOT MEET REQUIREMENTS (Less than 5)	NOTHING PRESENT

B. JOURNAL

EXCEEDS REQUIREMENTS (Writes more than required regularly)	MEETS REQUIREMENTS (Writes only what is asked regularly)	DOES NOT MEET REQUIREMENTS (Does not complete what is asked)	NOTHING PRESENT

C. TESTS

EXCEEDS REQUIREMENTS (Has all tests)	MEETS REQUIREMENTS (Is missing only 2 tests)	DOES NOT MEET REQUIREMENTS (Is missing more than 2 tests)	NOTHING PRESENT